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ABSTRACT

As more schools connect to the Internet and the quality of connection improves, teachers might want to do something other than look up the "CD in the sky." One option might be to bring an online guest into the classroom. Online technology enables teachers to integrate the experience of interacting with a guest into their curriculum activities. Guests let a teacher's students probe, interrogate, test hypotheses, and pose solutions. Guest can "visit" a classroom for a little while each day or participate in a single-day activity. These visits can be achieved through: electronic mail; text-based chat; voice and video exchanges through the Internet in an online meeting environment; digital recordings streamed through the Internet to the classroom; and a digital representation where the guest presents through a range of media and invites interaction by e-mail or chat after the presentation. But it is not easy for the busy primary school teacher to design the online events with a guest and overcome all the barriers and logistics of local sites. This PEN Digest describes some practical strategies for both designing and implementing an online guest event. The Digest describes a tightly organized process that ensures success when incorporating an online guest event into a curriculum activity. It suggests a sample teaching-learning sequence, provides a planning model, and discusses planning and implementing an online guest event for a few schools. (NKA)

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Digital Guests in Your Classroom. PEN 129.

by Michelle Williams

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PETA

Digital guests in your classroom

MICHELLE WILLIAMS

As more schools connect to the Internet and the quality of connection improves, you might want to do something other than look up the 'CD in the sky'. One appealing option might be to bring an online guest into your classroom.

Online technology enables you to integrate the experience of interacting with a guest into your curriculum activities, so that students can gain direct access to first-hand perspectives on an issue that are unlikely to be recorded on the Web or in other media. Guests let your students probe, interrogate, test hypotheses and pose solutions. The interaction is powerful. Guests also add authenticity to the class experience, and they complement the stories told by teachers and traditional texts. The Internet experience also enables your students to participate in the new genres of the digital age and learn more about communicating with others through digital media.

Guests can 'visit' a classroom for a little while each day or participate in a single-day activity. These visits can be achieved through:

- electronic mail
- text-based chat
- voice and video exchanges through the Internet in an online meeting environment
- digital recordings (voice and video) streamed through the Internet to your classroom
- a digital presentation where the guest presents through a range of media and invites interaction by email or chat after the presentation.

The guest may have previously visited your classroom in the flesh, in which case the electronic exchange becomes a follow-up visit. Where a guest visits in person, your students might record the interaction and then share it via streaming audio, perhaps analysing the spoken-word content with text and images on a web page. Many such variations of visitation are available (see Oz-TeacherNet for examples).

Although there are many good reasons for hosting an online guest as part of your program, it is not easy for the busy primary-school teacher to design the online events with a guest and overcome all the barriers and logistics of local sites. This PEN will describe some practical strategies for both designing and implementing an online guest event.

It is important to realise that when online guests are part of your classroom, you may need to be engaged in other behind-the-scenes online conversations. In their conversation with the guest, your students may feel that the guest is interacting directly, and perhaps only, with them. In the meantime, however, you will be having private conversations with your guest, helping the classroom event to run smoothly and managing the technical and other logistics. You may also be talking with other teachers, computer technicians and other curriculum advisers in your school to design, implement and reflect on your online event. In what follows, I will describe a tightly organised process that ensures success when incorporating an online guest event into a curriculum activity.

Why an online guest?

There are a number of curriculum rationales for bringing people into classrooms. Guests encourage students to be inquisitive; they provide an audience for questions and ideas, and they are both a source of primary data and a complementary source to other 'published' stories of the world. Guests broaden students' access to the stories that are rarely recorded in other media. For many, adding real context through people outside of the classroom is a powerful rationale — one that complements the enthusiasm for learning that students show when people and technologies enter meaningfully into the classroom.

The Internet is pervading the lives of families. It will play a significant role in the lives of students as they grow. The dot.com generation of students will experience different genres and dialogue than we would normally include in our classrooms. Thus, it becomes our responsibility to consider how the communications media enabled by the Internet might influence the learning experiences our students need. The new media and the interactions of the Internet present challenges that require us to rethink both constructing activities (writing, speaking, interviewing, questioning) and deconstructing activities (interpreting, reading, listening in text, voice and video, comprehending meaning).

Lankshear and Snyder (2000:30) contend that "Literacy should be seen as having three interlocking dimensions of learning and practice — the operational, the cultural and the critical". Using online guests in curriculum activities provides the operational dimension — students work through and with the technology. The cultural dimension occurs "in the practice" (*Ibid.*) — that is, students are living in the cyberworlds of contemporary citizens. And because this is a world in which students must transform the representations and classifications of the communication they are processing, a critical dimension will always accompany an online guest event. In all, working in the new texts of the Internet and engaging in the technology process is a *literacy* process.

Digital classroom guests also provide an opportunity for students to engage in authentic experiences. Online guests introduce real-world roles and perspectives into students' investigations. They promote the notions that people, for example, write books (author as a guest), believe in issues (online political advocate), have expertise (online expert) and can be mentors (guest mentor). It is important, then, to consider what type of conversation a guest might have with your class, and to match the medium or tools to that purpose. For example, chatting though a chat room is best suited to short and fast interactions. Williams and Turner (1999) elaborate:

> *'There is a link between online tools, genres and the purposes of activities.* Teachers will have positive dispositions to ideas which link learning to the learning technology tools embedded in online activities. Teachers may need advice about how to select these tools when embedding literacy ideas into online activities. For example, chat environments with short and rapid interaction may be suited to brainstorming activities. Threaded discussions might host more substantial arguments on issues. Multi-user environments may be places to host role plays. Multi-user environments might also be hosts for creative invention and dynamic interactions. Hypertext might help students organise ideas and connect concepts. Email might suit question posing and reflection. Exchanging sound and voice might help students communicate with a variety of senses. Understanding the connection between genre and online tools will help teachers select appropriate tools for learning experiences.'

What might an online guest event be like for your class?

There can be many variations of online guest events, and many strategies and tools to enable interaction between your students and your guest. Following is an example of a sequence for a curriculum activity which involves an online guest talking to small groups via email, with a live chat session scheduled at an appropriate point.

Sample teaching–learning sequence

- The teacher talks with students about the online guest, their lives and what the conversations with the guest might be like. Students will understand how the guest complements the class activities, and will know the teacher's expectations.
- The students are divided into small groups of four. Each group is given a unique mail account, a 'cyber-identity'. Each group writes a greeting, introducing its members and welcoming the guest into the group. If a digital camera is available, a photo of each group is sent with the email greeting.
- The guest replies to each group, perhaps exchanging a picture and a short description of themself.

- The teacher gives each group a task or role, and asks the students to begin interviewing the guest according to that task or role. The teacher might advise students to send only a couple of questions at a time, and to use the responses from the guest to focus the next question. Groups share their findings with the class through writing or presentations. The whole class then plans the live chat event, determining the purpose of the chat and how it will be conducted.
- In the live chat, selected students are given the task of typing questions and responding to the guest while the whole class watches through a projection system.
- Students then exchange letters of thanks to the guest while the guest's ideas and experiences are used in curriculum activities.

Behind the scenes, of course, a great deal of organisation, curriculum planning and classroom management has occurred.

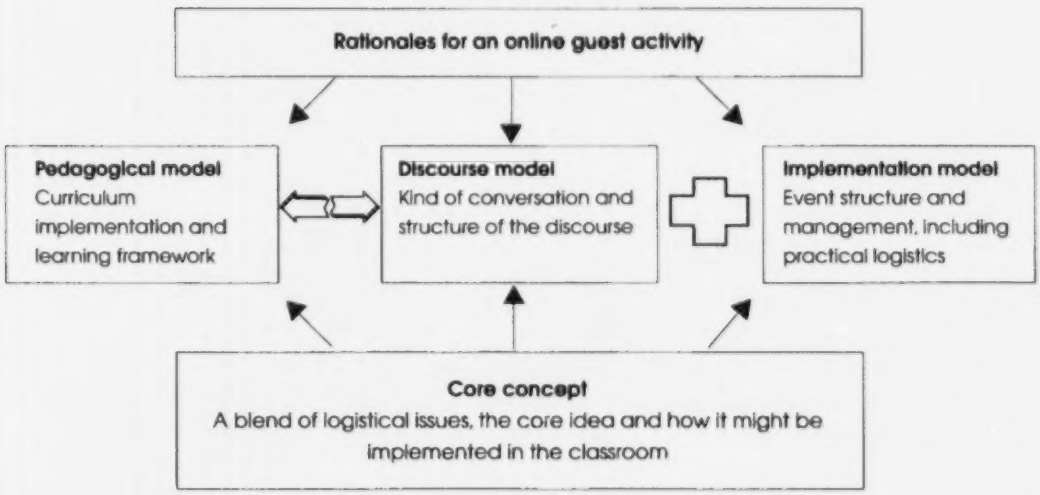
A planning model

Incorporating an online guest into a curriculum activity draws together three elements of teacher planning:

- the *curriculum and pedagogical framework* which enables students to develop skills and demonstrate outcomes; say a social investigations process in which the digital guests are providing students with first-hand accounts of the different perspectives on an issue
- a *discourse model* which explains the type of conversation that students and the guests might have; say an interview
- an *organisational or logistical model* which helps the teacher deal with the practical issues; say issues about access, and working with the guest to prepare for the online activity.

Teachers might methodically plan to use a guest because it meets a curriculum need. Alternatively, an opportunity might arise to invite a guest or participate in an Internet-based activity. Figure 1 below provides a model that can be applied to either approach.

Figure 1: ***Planning model for incorporating an online guest***


Rationales for an online guest activity
Pedagogical model
Curriculum implementation and learning framework
Discourse model
Kind of conversation and structure of the discourse
Implementation model
Event structure and management, including practical logistics
Core concept
A blend of logistical issues, the core idea and how it might be implemented in the classroom

The three middle boxes represent the teacher's design elements. When making decisions about the design of a digital event, teachers will simultaneously think through these three aspects. The design choices they make will derive from the rationales for hosting such an event in a classroom and from the concept that informs the learning strategy.

The diagrammatic representation suggests that pedagogy and conversation are closely linked. When the teacher's practical implementation model is added, the online guest event is likely to work well and achieve its purposes. This model is fully developed elsewhere (See Oz-TeacherNet), and is applied to several examples of digital events.

Planning and implementing an online guest event for a few schools

The following example is provided to illustrate how a teacher might plan an online guest activity having decided which type of conversation will support their curriculum approach. The activity illustrated here involves multiple schools in interactions with an online guest.

Pre-planning

- A guest is approached. The teacher negotiates topics for the discussions. Significant issues include the time frame for the event, the availability of the guest to participate in that time frame, and the expertise the guest is able to share. The task here includes identifying related websites and other resources, plus ascertaining the willingness and capacity of the guest to participate in a live episode via chat or equivalent medium.
- The topics and administrative procedures are refined with the guest. This might include placing the guest onto an email list where discussions will take place, checking their technical capacity and times in the day they are available for live chats, and factoring in class schedules.
- The structure of the conversation is negotiated with the guest by articulating the pedagogical model and the required type of conversation.
- The event participants (perhaps your class and classes of peers) are prepared for the event. They need to know about the event, prepare technically for participation and understand your expectations of their participation.
- The event is announced online. Sets of pre-event instructions are issued. This enables you to check that the technical logistics for the class and the guest are overcome.
- The guest and topic are announced. Clear instructions of how the conversations might proceed are provided. A separate biography of the guest might be sent.
- Some final technical instructions about participation are provided in a separate email. In particular, instructions regarding where to mail responses, what 'Subject Field' to use and how to 'Reply to the List' (and not only the sender) are important.
- In a private email, the online guest is invited to send the first posting.
- It may be useful, in addition, to host a web page with details of the event, provide a biography of the guest, supply a picture and repeat all technical and event management information.

Implementation

- The topic, problem or issue is announced and the guest introduced.
- The guest sends their first posting — interpreting the question or issue and sharing some simple experiences. The guest also invites first reactions and ideas from the participants. The purpose here is to gauge the capacity of the participants to contribute to the event, and to encourage people to contribute before the discussion becomes too complex. It could be considered a warm-up.
- The members of the list send their responses to the list. These responses enable participants to clarify the guest's ideas and extend the discussion.
- At a suitable point, the guest responds to the discussions and answers questions.
- The guest then challenges the group by moving to a new phase – extending the participants into more depth and particularity. He/She might pose a problem or scenario for the participants to respond to. Participants might be referred to resources that will provide them with a broader and more informed perspective.
- The participants react to the second phase, pose more questions and debate the issues online.
- The guest reacts to the discussion and answers questions, gives examples and extends discussion if necessary.
- The guest makes a final comment or summation. A 'critical friend' could also take on this role.
- The event is closed and the guest is thanked.
- The closure of the event is announced to the list. The event might be summarised on a web page and the participating schools informed about where that summary is hosted.

Promoting interaction

Online guest events are very difficult to manage and sustain for the organising teacher, especially if you are drawing in other school or community sites and are only using email and online communications for dialogue. Without seeing participants face-to-face, it is challenging to generate support. Online events also require lots of coaxing during the event. Careful preparation is not enough. There are three kinds of activity that can help events to succeed.

Support your guest

Send a great deal of personal email to your guest — encouraging them, checking out their technical issues, helping them out with difficult conversations, interpreting reactions with them and generally keeping them on track.

Call your guest by phone and talk with them about how they are coping with the conversations and the online guest model you have instigated.

Send email to the list, reminding participants and the guest about participation conventions and logistical issues.

Participate in the event yourself, as you might if you were in a classroom or face-to-face event.

Manage your class or group

If you are in a classroom situation, you can work with your class to ensure that student contributions will encourage dialogue. You are modelling what other teachers might follow. Discuss your progress with other participating teachers as you work.

Encourage other participating teachers to work with their classes in a similar way, and perhaps email individuals you know are contributing, in order to check on their progress.

Support good netiquette

To support participation, offer advice about following Internet conversation conventions. The following list may be useful.

- Participate. Online guests have given up time to be part of your community. Please participate in it actively, so they know you are benefiting from the event.
- Learn how to participate technically and conform with participation suggestions, especially about using the subject field.
- Be polite and courteous to all concerned in all email; watch the tone of your email and add greetings and salutations.
- 'Critique the message, not the messenger' is a good motto in online debates.
- Check the spelling, layout etc. of messages, and adopt normal writing standards.
- Avoid upper-case text. Use blank lines between paragraphs.
- When replying to messages, delete those parts you are not replying to and only include what is necessary for the context of your message to be clearly understood.
- Write short, digestible messages rather than long ones.
- Support your statements where practical, so that you can defend your arguments and others can critique your rationales.
- Encourage others to respond to your work.

Recording the event

It may be useful to build a website which acts as an organising device and a central place where people with lost instructions can be reminded of procedures and purposes. Here also, mail traffic can be archived, providing an instant record of the conversations. The web of the event, including all organising information, is an important record for other potential facilitators, so teachers can learn from your experiences. Most importantly, the curriculum content you have generated can be used by your class, other classes and professional-development leaders.

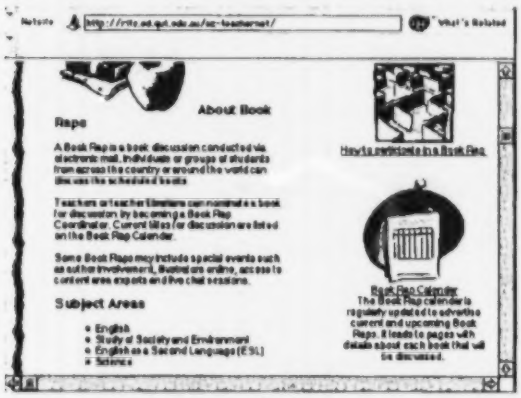
Examples of online guest events

As a learning experience, and to help you clarify your own ideas, it may be useful to think about joining an online event that someone else has organised. Some telecommunications curriculum projects incorporate online guests. They are a good place to start. These projects usually involve multiple schools who work together, exchanging email and participating in a variety of online and offline activities under a theme.

For example, the Claypoles project in 1999 involved students in correspondence with Jim and Yvonne Claypole, who were living in Antarctica for the year (http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/claypoles/). Students were able to correspond directly with the Claypoles, read their journals and diaries, ask questions and make suggestions about strategies and ideas to help the Claypoles survive their adventure. Chat and phone

sessions were arranged from time to time. Although this telecommunications curriculum project was organised by the Victorian Department of Education, Employment and Training (with other sponsors participating in some activities and supplying online content), teachers were responsible for integrating the project resources and events into their curriculum programs. Some teachers were more active in using Jim and Yvonne as online guests than others.

More recently, the ever-popular BookRaps from Oz-TeacherNet — which involve students from a number of schools participating in exchanges about a book they are reading — have included authors, illustrators and subject-matter experts as online guests. Interested teachers should refer to the Oz-TeacherNet website (see references) for examples, ideas and contacts.



Above: BookRaps enable digital conversation about readings.

Project Atmosphere Australia is a multi-faceted project centred around understanding, recording and predicting weather. The project also includes activities which centre around the impact of weather on lifestyles and local communities, and understanding the origins of those weather fables that are so much a part of Australian vernacular. Many activities in the project involve students interacting online with weather-forecasting experts. Guidance about including online experts is included on the website (http://www.schools.ash.org.au/paa/).

Organised telecommunications projects provide a structure for teachers to access experts and develop classroom activities while participating in a supportive community of other teachers. As connectivity becomes routine in classrooms, teachers are also electing to organise online events themselves. Unfortunately, many teachers have no mechanism to find out how to do this, to share ideas about new teaching strategies or to report their successes.

However, ideas are being shared in the communities that are now part of the online culture of Australian teachers. See Oz-TeacherNet for a complete list of supportive online teachers and telecommunications curriculum projects.

Conclusion

Online guests can enhance student learning. They are, however, complex events to manage; careful planning is necessary in order for the event to achieve its goals. Underneath the event, there must be a pedagogical model for designing the task, from which a clear structure can emerge. It is then that planning how to manage the event becomes definable and the whole project achievable.

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About the author

Michelle Williams is a lecturer in learning technology and computer studies at Queensland University of Technology. She is also president of the Australian Council for Computers in Education and the International representative on the International Society for Information Technology in Education (ISTE). She has been involved in developing online communities and telecommunications curriculum projects for more than 10 years and is a founder of Oz-TeacherNet, Aussie SchoolHouse and Oz-Projects. More recently, she has worked with the national key learning area associations in a project called Natcom, to develop models for online activities to be used nationally in curriculum development initiatives.

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